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“ONLY TOO CLEAR”

BY C. E. MONTAGUE

You will often hear people say that this or that is “only too clear”. They use the words as a prefix to some assertion or other. The words commonly mean that the speaker only wishes it *were* clear that things are as he states them. People do not say so often that some written thing, a poem or novel or article, is only too clear. No doubt they are afraid of being thought foolish. Were they not brought up at school to think clearness an unquestionable virtue in an English essay? Are there not dozens of current phrases which all seem to imply that self-expression is always a kind of rendering up of something measurable, predetermined, unmistakable, like the amount of a tailor’s bill, something which must be faced, as it is, and got rid of?

And yet there must be a good many of us who would like to pipe up in protest against certain kinds of intensive cultivation of lucidity. We feel that we are being overdosed with its products in public controversy, in fiction and verse and even in sermons. Who does not know the kind of journalistic polemic in which the reader is perpetually presented with the rigid, tight-drawn dilemma? Who, again, has not, at some time or other, groaned dumbly under a flood of clearness from a pulpit? You remember the kind of almost imbecile limpidity? First the giving out of a text which is itself as clear as noon; say, “A city set on a hill”; and then the progressive illumination of this strong original light with many pounds of cheap candles. You know how the dreary searchlight travels on from word to word: *A city*, mark you. Not two cities! Not twin cities like Assisi and Perugia. And yet a city. No mere village! No hamlet perched on a knoll:—and so on and on till the martyred Christian below has to ask, in his heart, “Shall I never hit back?” as Juvenal did when his friend recited the epic.

The same cult of clearness at any price has spread into fiction

and perhaps especially into the kind of descriptive writing that borders on fiction or overlaps it, the writing of what are sometimes called "sketches" or, after the French phrase, "things seen". In these some of the tritest proceedings of nature and of man are reported with a literal and insipid veracity never previously attempted. The subject matter of these chaste exercises is often of a studied thinness, and you sometimes feel that the author is almost eagerly disclaiming the idea of disturbing his superficial sensibilities by any effort of thought. "Nothing in my brain I bring," he seems to be saying to us, with a kind of pious complacency at his own freedom from mental baggage. "I do not rhyme," says Scott,

to that dull elf
Who cannot image to himself

this, that and the other thing. But that is what the super-lucid writer evidently feels that he is doing. We are the "dull elves" whose imagination is presumed incapable of any collaboration with an author while we read him.

We may well demur to this too ardent quest of clearness on the score of comity between writer and reader. But there is a deeper objection. A writer might have all the good manners there ever were in Versailles and yet overstep a lawful limit of confident clearness. The limit I mean is—to put it very roughly and generally—that which is imposed by the inevitable incompleteness of a writer's knowledge. Until you know a thing exhaustively you have, in a sense, no right to be wholly clear about it; if your account of it conveys no impression of a dim borderland in which your knowledge gradually loses itself, then your account is misleading and possibly an imposture. Of course the current estimates of the possibility of exhaustiveness in knowledge may vary much from time to time and in different places. The times when mere clearness in writing, clearness at any price, has anywhere been valued most highly have also been times when the likelihood of reaching clear and final results, along many lines of thought, was, as we now see, over-rated. Such periods have been intolerant of all mysticism and disinclined to believe that there can be many more things of any consequence in heaven or on earth than were dreamt of, or indeed defined, in the current philosophies. A

typical product of such a period was the older English political economy in which a thin, fallacious lucidity seemed to make everything clear, only by failing to see that there was anything at all to solve where the worst difficulties lay.

The current psychology of fifty years ago had the same illusory sharpness of outline, the same false finality. It took as the unit of mental life the idea, the single, separable idea, isolating each idea as a detached clearly describable thing by which, in turn with other ideas, the mind could be wholly occupied. The books of psychology then in vogue might make you think of your consciousness as if it were a railway signal lamp at one moment wholly red and nothing but red, at the next wholly green and nothing but green. But during the last forty years psychology has looked more closely at the mental life and has found it a good deal less simple. The result has been an entirely new way of envisaging that life. The unit of the mental life, as modern psychologists see it, is not the insulated idea but the whole wave, or field, as it is variously called, of consciousness at any given instant. From moment to moment the mind, like an eye, puts itself forth on successive fields of consciousness, each field melting or modulating into the next in chronological order like the successive photographs forming a cinematographic film. Each of these fields of consciousness has its centre of interest, on which there is at least a relative concentration of the mind. Of the contents of the surrounding portions of the field the mind grows less and less intensely conscious as their distances from the centre of interest increase; they fade away in widening circles of diminishing interest towards the margin of the field and there, without any definite frontier line, they merge into the outer dimness.

Of course the size of these fields of consciousness differs enormously, as between one person and another. A man or woman of genius, of any kind, probably has, at any rate at his best times, a far greater width of field than the rest of us. It may be a common attribute of the great poet, the great scientific thinker and the great organizer. The size of the field also varies immensely as between one and another state of the same person. A person ill or depressed or tired or sleepy commonly has his field of consciousness much contracted for the time. Some stirring

experience, the drastic stimulus of some masterpiece in art or of some other personal emotion, may swiftly dilate your field of consciousness, so that you feel invisible things drifting into sight and hearing and un hoped for achievements of comprehension and insight coming as if magically within your power. To any writer whose work is congenial there will come in the same way a curious extension of his ordinary faculties; he will find portions of knowledge floating back into his brain, available for use, which he had supposed to be thrown away long ago on the rubbish-heap outside the back-door of his mind; relevant passages will quote themselves to his mind from books that he scarcely remembers ever to have read; and he suddenly sees germane connections where in his ordinary state of mind he would see nothing.

In the field of conduct, too, we find sudden enlargements of the customary field of consciousness leading to actions, heroic or criminal, which those who have done them can only ascribe, when the field has contracted again, to unaccountable impulse. From the uncharted region of the outer consciousness one of these impulses may strike in and impinge on us much as the cyclones come up incalculably from the Southern Atlantic and impinge on Southwest Ireland. A kindred effect, or a simulacrum of these effects, is producible in some measure by alcohol and other drugs, and no doubt their tragic hold on mankind is mainly due to their power of giving at least the illusion of temporary release from narrow, cold and cramping fields of consciousness.

What happens in all these cases is not so much that anything wholly unknown, wholly outside the range of the mind, has been brought within its reach. It is rather as if some outer zone of an estate which you already own were brought back into use after lying derelict. May it not be said, with some truth, that it is part of the business of imaginative literature to reclaim at least parts of that region? We remember the old rough division of literature into the literature of knowledge and the literature of power, the former being that of science and the latter that of imagination. Certainly the literature of knowledge has during the last half century taken a splendid share in these labors of reclamation, or at any rate in the map-making work which must precede it. One need only mention the names of those who have

converted psychology from a cloud of unverified surmises into a science almost as systematic as that of physics. But long before the last half century the literature of power or imagination had offered us inlets of its own by which to penetrate deeply into this surrounding twilight.

Thus to widen the reader's or spectator's field of consciousness is a function of intensely imaginative literature. If a writer has imaginative power it means that his own field of consciousness is at some times exceptionally large. If to this power he adds technical accomplishment it means that he can express his own delighted sense of this enlargement in a way which stimulates a corresponding enlargement of the consciousness of a fit reader. An obvious illustration of the exercise of both powers is Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*. One feels that the poet has first experienced so unusual an enlargement of the ordinary field of consciousness that on the murky verge of the field certain mystic shapes, dim, but still shapes, have begun to take form for his mind, and that at a radius from the centre so great that for most of us it is a region of mere obscurity yielding us nothing but some vague promptings and cravings and regrets. And then he has contrived in a wonderful measure to express this visionary revelation of his own in a way that renders mystic reverie in the reader more coherent and articulate than it could otherwise have been. But in doing this he has not achieved, nor attempted to achieve, the clearness of an advertisement. It is wonderful, but it is not clear as an election poster is clear. It is almost as far from being clear as are the four great Michelangelo statues in the Church of San Lorenzo at Florence, of which Pater says that “they concentrate and express, less by way of definite conceptions than by the touches, the promptings of a piece of music, all those vague fancies, misgivings, presentiments, which shift and mix and are defined and fade again, whenever the thoughts try to fix themselves with sincerity on the conditions and surroundings of the disembodied spirit.” What the figures express, badly and literally, to a spectator on whose imagination they have not yet begun to work, has been playfully described by R. L. Nettleship, the philosopher: “I walk into the Medici Chapel, my body and soul encased in their nineteenth century coat and trousers. I see

four naked marble figures, in attitudes which I probably could not put myself into at all, and certainly could not remain in for five minutes. One lady is fast asleep, one gentleman wide awake; so much is comfortingly obvious. The other lady seems to have nearly finished undressing; the other gentleman has passed a restless night; both look dubious and uncomfortable. Such are the brute impressions which many, if they were honest, would have to confess to." Those two extracts from Pater and from Nettleship give you, better than anything else I can think of, the contrast between a narrow and an extremely wide field of consciousness.

Well, it is a free country; and anyone may take his mental ease who will. Only, if one is going to hold by absolute clearness, then one is going to shut oneself out from a good many things. For there are many things which cannot be expressed clearly without being expressed falsely. If everything in the shadowy corners of a Rembrandt interior were painted so that you could say just what it was, the painting would have lost its truth and its beauty. When Corot went out to paint his vaporous landscapes in the early morning he would work until the sun dried up the mist and then say, "Everything is visible; there's nothing left;" and then he would knock off work for the day. In literature there can be few better instances of the suggestive value of a certain avoidance of clearness than the songs of Shakespeare. The superficial unreason and inconsequence of the song that ends *Twelfth Night* is like a gay defiance of any thin rationalism in critics of poetry; it seems to flaunt in their faces a divine new clearness of its own, a clearness that passeth all understanding; for, beyond question, such a song calls up in us with unsurpassable distinctness the mood intended by its author, however incoherent the terms of the summons may seem to be; and it cannot have been by accident that Shakespeare, like Corot, wanted to have the mists between our eyes and the landscape.

There are some modern writers in whom this element of obscurity has attracted unusual notice and whose popularity it has tended to limit. The case most often cited is that of Meredith, in whose work it is often difficult for the reader to see things clearly, not because there is a want of light but because there seems to be

too much of it; in him you see things with their outline blurred by excess of light, as you see the sun at mid-day. Meredith dazzles and dazes you, as Professor Elton says, with a “sparkling mist or spray of commentary, an emanation of bewildering light” which he sheds round the characters and events of his novels. Meredith, in making out these reports on his travels beyond the pale, pours out a turbid flood of illustrative images, one tumbling over the other, so that you feel rather like Benedick when Beatrice chaffed him—as he says, “huddling jest upon jest, with such impressible conveyance upon me that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me.” It resembles to some extent the speech of certain characters in Shakespeare for whom one cannot help feeling that Shakespeare had a special liking—Mercutio, Falstaff and the Biron of *Love’s Labor Lost*, characters of an immense elation and gusto, whose abounding enjoyment of the human spectacle cannot always wait to complete one piece of self-expression before rushing on to another.

Another modern writer, sometimes charged with heresy by the high-priests of clearness, is Mr. Yeats, in whom the obscurity is not the Meredithian dazzlement with excess of offered light, but a real dusk, wilfully courted. The wooing of this twilight has been repeatedly defended by Mr. Yeats on a quasi-spiritualist theory of composition which, I must own, leaves me standing still and wondering. But many people have their principles all bad and their practice all good. Though I can make little of Mr. Yeats’s doctrine that poetry ought to be “got ’tween asleep and wake”, as Edmund in *King Lear* describes the legitimate heirs, still one must admire the wanton heed and giddy cunning with which, both in verse and in prose, he edges lucidity, as it were, with a fringe of dimness, just as the clearly seen centre of the landscape is fringed with circles of the indistinct. If Mr. Yeats describes a wood in summer he can give you a sense of elfin presences within it; and when he expresses a mood, he gives you the impression of a small emergent and expressible part of a much larger less definite whole, submerged first in semi-transparent subconsciousness and then in the opaque depths of still more rudimentary subconsciousness, much as a little coral island or an iceberg is related to a far greater bulk under the sea. By con-

stant renunciation of the obvious tempting climax of a demonstration, by shunning the word or phrase which, in seeming to clinch a matter and hit a nail the last stroke on the head, gives the reader a delusive sense of finality where there is no finality, by heading off the kind of clearness which is got only by airily treating something unknown as if you knew it, Mr. Yeats may dissatisfy readers who crave for the universal cocksureness of bad journalism and of minor politics. But, after all, the attitude, the bearing towards a theme, is that of Socrates; it is that of Montaigne; and it is that of modern science which, the further it goes, guards itself the more carefully against any assumption of having attained exhaustiveness and finality.

But Meredith and Mr. Yeats offer us only particularly obvious examples of a quality which in subtler forms is found in all highly imaginative writers. In some of the greatest this margin of enigmatic suggestion is conveyed under the most cunning semblance of absolute clearness. You know the lines of Burns:

The boat rocks at the pier of Leith,
Fu' loud the wind blaws frae the ferry.

The whole song has an air of perfectly straight dealing with you; a child can understand the first intentions of all the words; but these seeming simplicities are craftily charged, by the manner of their choice and arrangement, with ulterior suggestions evoking in you groups of ideas for which the more obvious significance of the words will not account. The same may be said of the much quoted lines from Nash:

Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath dimmed Helen's eyes.

All that the lines say, on the surface, is truism and commonplace; they seem to say it badly. But everyone feels that this show of shallow clearness is illusive and that, beyond their more obvious and literal meaning, the words have a virtue or energy capable of raising in you certain emotions as unmistakable as elephants though also as undefinable.

I am uneasily aware that just here we are walking close to one of the thorniest of critical thickets. The whole prickly question

of symbolism with its malign power of setting critics by the ears, and poets too, is very near. But we need not, for the present purpose, raise the question whether this special quality of poetry, this keeping open of its communications with the subconscious part of our mental life, is mainly a Celtic contribution to literature or is a survival from the primæval poetry and legend of many races. Nor the question whether, in this effort at fuller self-expression and at communion with reality, the imagination is trying to get past the malignity and obstructiveness of a delusive world of sense and of intellect—a hostile host of “things” and of reasoned thoughts—or whether things and thoughts are themselves portions of reality and not even the blackest sheep among her flocks. For our immediate concern is only with the simpler issue between the traditional pregnancy of all great art—you find it even in the rather hard dry poetry of Pope and in the most prosaic paintings of the great Dutchmen—and a kind of writing in which, almost as a matter of principle, nothing is left unsaid and no more is meant than meets the ear. You read it through, trying in charity to believe that surely the writer must have got hold of something more than he directly says; you hope he may be like the Sphinx, who used often to seem to be asking her clients an easy one when she really gave them something much tougher to tackle. But no, the pellucid rubbish has no camouflaged fulness of meaning; it is all like hard false literal painting on tin; the trees have no dryads about them and the Sphinx is just a foolish old lady without any secret to keep or to tell.

Now that this protest is just at an end I begin to feel, as one often does at such moments, that I have left out most of the subject. Among the things on which there has been no time to touch is the whole question of the difference between the expression of obscurity and obscurity of expression. Of course it is one of the most elementary faults in writing or speaking to express relatively simple things with a relatively high degree of indistinctness. It is half the work of education to cure us of this malady in its grosser forms. You find it in school boys’ essays, where it comes of helplessness, and in the work of some minor poets who want to be crepuscular and to bring on Celtic or other twilights, but do not know how. It is for criticism to distinguish

this obscurity of the confused or astigmatic mind, or of affectation, or of a small or ill-used vocabulary, from that different element of enigma which may remain when the greatest powers of expression have been most strenuously used. Perhaps one might say, very roughly, that it is the difference between a muddled statement of something already known and an indication, necessarily indeterminate and ambiguous, of some unexplored possibility of further knowledge. We have all found, from the current reports of the great physical discoveries of Einstein, how far from clear the most skilful statement of an unfamiliar scientific fact may be. One might illustrate the difference between indulgence in excess of clearness, and a proper renunciation of extreme clearness, in imaginative literature by comparing the bad popular statements of the new discovery, in which it is made quite intelligible by being roughly and falsely summarized, with the more faithful statements of it, which are difficult because they really try to reflect a difficult matter.

Another point, and a very hard one, which I have left out, is that of the difficulty of teaching the proper limits of clearness. In all ordinary work-a-day uses of the spoken or written word we suffer so much more from want of clearness than from excess of it that it might seem like reversing the engines of education to warn a boy or girl that one may be too clear. It might be foolish to do so in the earlier stages of education. Anyhow it is not done; and now that we have had nearly fifty years of popular half-education, we naturally have an enormous number of people whose education has not reached the point at which any critical attitude towards this virtue of clearness is practicable or, perhaps, safe. Hence a strong economic pressure, which cannot be ignored, upon popular writers in the direction of extreme clearness, or at least the appearance of it. A common result is a kind of writing rather like a watch with a highly luminous face, but with no hands. Or, to use a different illustration, it is like a tree with no roots, nothing more about it than what first meets the eye, whereas the best of imaginative writing has its leaves in the light and its roots in the darkness and does not deny its own nature nor the continuity of the known with the unknown.

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